

Communicating Science

By Mark Watkins

Remember how you used to write up those science experiments you did in high school? They went: 'method, results, conclusion', and that's about as memorable as they got. Imagine then, taking the people who pursued that path as a career, and turning them into effective communicators.



It's the challenge in sectors from academia and research, to hospitals and biotechnology. Done well, the results can bring something inspiring and educational to the attention of a wide audience. Done badly, and you can find yourself looking at the ugly offspring of corporate-speak and baffling science.

So what are the five top tips for breaking through the jargon?

1. Tell them to forget their own team

Scientists are used to having their work peer-reviewed. That means their work is normally read by people who already know what they are talking about. This means they have a tendency to strive for a level of detail and precision that is sure to baffle a lay audience. The first breakthrough is to get them to realise that they are developing a communication, not for the three other members of the team who worked on this project, but for the hundreds, thousands, or millions who have never heard of it.

2. Use metaphor

A great starting point for helping an audience to connect with difficult science, is to use a more familiar metaphor. Often, when pushed, the expert you are working with will come up with it themselves. One pharmaceutical company I worked with wanted to explain the importance of high-throughput molecular screening to its R&D programme. In a nutshell, this is an automated process for the company to compare all of its research drugs against the disease or target it is trying to treat. It's looking for some sort of interaction in the laboratory before pursuing things further. When pushed and pushed, the expert on this process said, "It's like panning for gold." Bingo! Without needing to understand the science, the rest of the organisation understood what was involved and why it was important.

3. Get informal

To develop the story from the initial metaphor, ask the expert to imagine themselves in a social setting rather than at work or at a conference. The level of understanding of the audience is more akin to fellow guests at a dinner party or friends on a night out. Get them to respond to the: "So what do you do all day" question with this audience in mind.

4. Ask someone who cares

Many organisations are quite happy to listen to their own voices all day long. As a communicator, it's our job to take an objective view about whether the

person we are hearing from is actually the right voice to tell the story, or whether they are merely providing information that will assist in the telling of the story. Another pharmaceutical company I worked with had an amazing drug for the treatment of pain experienced by patients with terminal cancer. It eased their final days and enabled them to interact with their friends and relatives to the end. The company had several attempts at telling this powerful story but always ended up with the same voice telling the story: a very pleasant, but nevertheless very dull marketing guy. It was only when they broke out of this cycle - by interviewing doctors, patients and relatives who were dealing with this awful scenario -- that they succeeded in getting employees to understand what a difference this product made to patients and their loved ones.

5. Make it memorable

It's easy to slip into doing the same things over and over without challenging ourselves to try a new, more creative approach. But presenting something creatively adds to its impact. One pharmaceutical company I worked with was developing drugs for schizophrenia and was struggling to get employees to understand the disease and the importance of their work. As a new approach, they approached the schizophrenia patients' association to ask their advice. After much discussion, they found that the association had an art group and that the members expressed their disease through paintings and illustrations. The company decided to give over 12 pages of their company magazine to this art. No words, no interviews, no product endorsements. Just an insight into the minds of those they were trying to help. Understanding and commitment rose immediately afterwards.

A final thought

Sometimes it's inevitable that the complexity of what you are explaining will lose some people. If that's the case, ensure you lose them at the end rather than the beginning. Begin your communication simply, adding complexity slowly and where unavoidable. If 100% of your audience hear the opening summary and 10% of them make it to the end, then that's better than 90% dropping out at the start because they don't understand your opener.

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